

Duxbury's connection to Salem witch trials, Hollywood

By Mary McKenzie
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When studying the Salem witch trials in school, no one would ever know that there was a Duxbury man involved in that horrible phenomenon in the nation's early history. But there is. Captain John Alden (1626- 1701), the oldest son of John and Priscilla Alden, escaped becoming one of the people killed. The teenage girls who were accusing various people in town of witchcraft pointed the finger at the junior John Alden in 1692, when he was working in Salem as a sea captain and merchant. He was accused of using witchcraft and torturing them. He was immediately arrested and jailed in Boston.

With the help of several friends, Alden was able to escape the prison. He came back to Duxbury, where he stayed until the "public had reclaimed its use of reason," he is quoted as saying. When Alden returned to Salem, he was cleared of all charges right away. He was buried in Boston, and his gravestone was discovered in 1870 during a street widening project. That gravestone is now mounted in the entryway of the (New) Old North Church at Copley.

Hollywood and the Aldens

Duxbury has seen more than its share of film crews over the years, but few would think that one of the greatest of Hollywood legends had a connection to Duxbury. Marilyn Monroe, aka Norma Jean Rae, was a descendant of John and Priscilla Alden. Also, actor, director, writer and producer George Orson Welles (1915-1985), "Citizen Kane" or "War of the Worlds," is a descendant of the Aldens as well.

The White House and the Aldens

It seems fitting that the descendents of pioneers would be found in our nation's political sector and there is no dearth of Aldens here either. Presidents including John Adams (1735-1826), John Quincy Adams (1767- 1848), Calvin Coolidge (1872- 1933) and vice president Dan Quayle (born in 1947, served under President George Bush in 1988-1992), as well as Senator Adlai Stevenson (D, IL), who is no longer in the political realm. Stevenson was born in 1930. All of these leaders share John and Priscilla Alden in their family tree.

The Met and Broadway and the Aldens

Choreographer and dancer Martha Graham (1894-1991), who is considered to be the mother of modern dance, is a descendant of the Aldens. In 1926, she started her own dance school, the Martha Graham Center of Contemporary Dance. She was the first dancer invited to perform at the White House and she spent over 70 years performing. Graham choreographed until she died at 96, in 1991.

Another Alden descendent, American mezzo-soprano Frederica Von Stade, born in 1940, first performed with the Metropolitan Opera in 1970 in "The Marriage of Figaro." She has performed at the Met often since then, as well as on television in many operas around the country and at the 2002 winter Olympics.

Historical source for this article is "Fame - Famous Descendants of John and Priscilla Alden," by Dodie Creek, written in 2014 for the Alden Kindred of America.